



It's September 1, 2020. In today's issue: WWII dogs; How Eliza Grayson escaped Nebraska slavery; Post Office stories; Popular on our blog and social media; History Learning Center Experience.

From the Director: WWII "Dogs for Defense"



September 2 marks the 75th anniversary of the end of World War II. I spent part of last week doing dozens of local, regional, and national interviews about the War Dog program at Fort Robinson, Nebraska, and History Nebraska's children's book [Major: A Soldier Dog](#).

After the United States entered World War II, a group of people led by dog breeder Alene Erlanger started Dogs for Defense. The military needed war dogs to patrol factories, serve as messengers, scouts, and to detect mines, but they did not have any dogs. Dogs for Defense called on patriotic Americans to enlist their pets in the army. Thousands of ordinary Americans sent their pets away to help the war effort, with no idea if they would ever see them again.

During the war, Fort Robinson in western Nebraska was the military's most important and longest lasting dog training center. An estimated 14,000 dogs passed through the fort, and the dogs trained there served even every theatre of the war. The training methods developed in Nebraska became the basis for the techniques used to train service dogs of all types today.

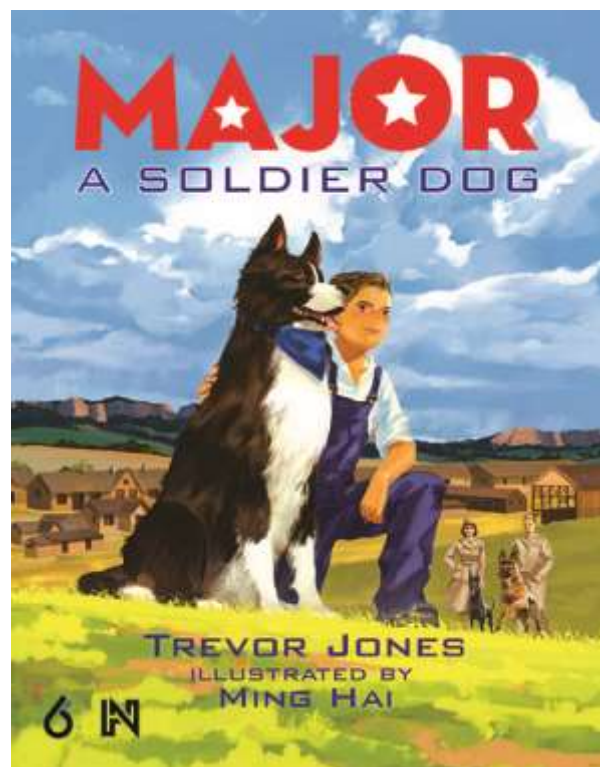
Major: A Soldier Dog tells the story of Major, a border collie donated to by five-year-old Sid Moore and trained at Fort Robinson. After fighting overseas, Major received an honorable discharge and was welcomed back to Sid's house as a hero.

The story of the Fort Robinson War Dog Training Center is fascinating, and the program's history is covered in detail in Tom Buecker's book *Fort Robinson and the American Century, 1900-1948*. I wanted to tell it again as a children's book, because the Dogs for Defense program allows us to explore bigger issues around the concepts of patriotism and sacrifice. Abstract concepts are sometimes difficult for kids to understand, but asking the question "Would you give up your pet to help your country?" makes those ideas very real.

I believe that one of the key values of history is that understanding of the past helps us work toward a better future. As we reflect on the sacrifices and legacy of World War II 75 years after its end, it is again important for us to ask: what am I willing to give up for the greater good?

If you would like to purchase *Major: A Soldier Dog*, it is [available here](#) or wherever books are sold.

Trevor Jones, Director & CEO



How Eliza Grayson escaped Nebraska slavery

Negro Girl named Eliza
negro was 12 years old 24th Jan
& the said Eliza Nuckolls Rates the
at \$350 And provided the said
Should consider that I do not

Eliza Grayson was one of the very first enslaved people brought to Nebraska when the territory opened to white settlers in 1854. Her escape from Nebraska City and capture in Chicago created a sensation in 1860.

Was she brought back to Nebraska, or did she get away? Here's her story, along with a document from our archives showing her transfer of ownership to future Nebraska City founder Stephen Nuckolls when Eliza was 12 years old. [Keep reading.](#)

Post Office Stories

The US Postal Service has been in the news a lot recently. Here are some postal stories from the past and present.

Caring for a Post Office mural



In the 1930s, the US Post Office commissioned murals for local post offices across the country. It was part of a New Deal program to create jobs along with works of art celebrating local history. History Nebraska's Gerald R. Ford Conservation Center has been restoring a terracotta maquette for a mural by Kansas artist Waylande Gregory. It once hung in the post office in Columbus, Kansas. See before-and-after pictures and learn how our conservators saved this delicate and damaged work of art. [Keep reading.](#)

But what about *Nebraska's Post Office Murals*?



We published a hardcover book with color fold-outs and never-before-published artists' sketches of the post office murals across Nebraska. It's available at the Nebraska History Museum and online via University of Nebraska Press. [Learn more.](#)

Airmail Centennial is September 8



September 8 marks the [centennial](#) of coast-to-coast daytime airmail delivery. [A state historical marker](#) stands near the site of Ak-Sar-Ben Field in Omaha. Early airmail involved open-cockpit biplanes and bold pilots who navigated by road maps and landmarks. [Read more](#) about 1920s airmail.

“Neither snow nor rain nor heat nor gloom of night”



We don't know the story behind this early 1900s postcard photo. Marquette (Hamilton County) never had much more than 300 people at its peak in 1930. Such a quantity of mailbags may not have been for local delivery. They might have been pulled from a stuck Burlington train after a heavy snow.

The US Postal Service has long boasted that it is stopped by "neither snow nor rain nor heat nor gloom of night." South of Marquette in Aurora, Wayne Arthur Shaneyfelt worked as a mail carrier from the 1930s into the 1970s. When he started, carriers on city routes had no vehicles and walked their entire routes twice a day—about 12 to 15 miles in all.

Writing for *I Remember... Family Stories from Hamilton County, Nebraska* (1999), Shaneyfelt recalled that the "roughest day" of his long career was during his first winter on the job. Aurora didn't require people to scoop their sidewalks, and every house had

a mailbox on the front porch. That morning he waded through two-foot-deep snow—and did it again that afternoon. Everyone on his route received their mail.

Popular on our blog and social media



- Last month we told you about the 300th anniversary of the Villasur Massacre. Now we've posted several short videos about the expedition, the archeology, and how HN artist Curt Peacock researched the pigments of the faded hide painting to create his replica. [Learn more](#).
- If you missed the one about the guy who fell 143 feet down a well *and survived*, check this out. He survived the fall, but with no one around, [did he make it out alive?](#)
- By 1795 an Omaha Nation settlement called [Tonwantonga](#) had twice the population of present-day Homer, Nebraska, near the same site.
- Did you know that Top 40 radio was invented in Omaha? [This post was a hit](#).
- Take a look at this circa-1890 [log schoolhouse](#) north of Rushville.
- Was the [North Platte Riot](#) really a riot? And is that even the right question to ask?

- Shh... talk softly on the [whispering bench](#) in Nebraska City (video).



History Learning Center Experience

This new program lets families enjoy a safe, hands-on experience with history! Take a 30-45 minute tour through various hands-on activities in the museum's History Learning Center. Available by appointment between 10 am and 4 pm on Fridays. [Read more.](#)



History Nebraska Newsletter, David Bristow, Editor, history.nebraska.gov

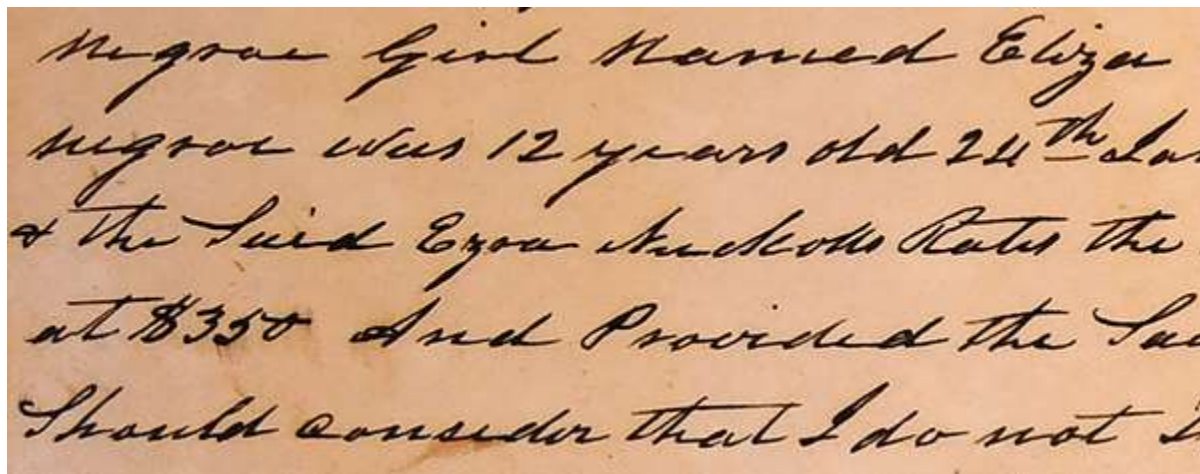
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Complete articles:

How Eliza Grayson escaped Nebraska slavery



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By David L. Bristow, Editor

Eliza Grayson was one of the very first enslaved people brought to Nebraska when the territory opened to white settlers in 1854. Her escape from Nebraska City and capture in Chicago created a sensation in 1860.

In the archives of History Nebraska is a battered composition book titled *A Memorandum of Amount of Articles which Ezra Nuckolls give to his Children, December 28th 1838*. Among the “articles” described is a “negro” girl named Eliza.

Eliza had been born the property of Ezra Nuckolls at the family’s home in Grayson County, Virginia. The family moved in 1846 to Atchison County, Missouri, in the state’s northwest corner. There, Ezra’s adult son Stephen “entered the mercantile business.” In 1850 Ezra gave 12-year-old Eliza to 25-year-old Stephen, who signed the following terms in his father’s account book (transcribed below):

Whereas Ezra Nuckolls hath this day
 conditionally given unto me one
 negroe Girl named Eliza the Said
 negroe was 12 years old 24th Jany last.
 & the Said Ezra Nuckolls Rates the negroe
 at \$350 And Provided the Said Ezra
 Should consider that I do not treat the
 negroe Kind & Humanely as a negroe should
 be treated or that I am likely to sell the
 negroe contrary to his wish, & the Said
 Ezra Nuckolls has the Right at any time
 within Six years to take Said negroe back
 Provided he presents his note to me for \$350-
 payable within Six Months from the time
 he takes the negroe back; For the true
 Compliance with the above agreement
 I bind myself my Heirs, Exors & Assigns
 under my hand & Seal 28th July 1850
 Stephen F. Nuckolls

Whereas Ezra Nuckolls hath this day conditionally given unto me one negroe Girl
 named Eliza the Said negroe was 12 years old 24th Jany last. & the Said Ezra
 Nuckolls Rates the negroe at \$350 And Provided the Said Ezra Should consider

that I do not Treat the negro Kind & Humanely & as a negroe Should be treated or that I am likely to Sell the negroe Contrary to his wish, He the Said Ezra Nuckolls has the Right at any time within Six years to take Said negroe back Provided he Presents his note to me for \$350 – payable within Six Months from the time he takes the negroe back; For the true Complyensce with the above argument I bind myself my Heirs, Exor, etc. Given under my hand & Seal 28th July 1850

Stephen F. Nuckolls

What did it mean to treat a slave “Kind & Humanely”? Did it mean that Stephen was not allowed to beat Eliza if he felt she deserved it? Unlikely—the institution of slavery was maintained with the threat of violence if not always with the act.

Did it mean he couldn’t rape her if he felt so inclined? The rape of enslaved women by their owners was so common as to be an open secret, and the law provided no protection.

* * *

We don’t know how Stephen treated Eliza. We know that soon after Nebraska opened to white settlers in 1854, Stephen brought four slaves into the territory, including Eliza and a younger girl named Celia. Nuckolls is said to be the first of the 1854 settlers to bring slaves to Nebraska. He became the most prominent founder of Nebraska City, established a local bank, and served in the territorial legislature.

In 1858, Eliza and Celia met a man named John Williamson. He was of mixed race, Black and Native American, and he offered to help them escape.

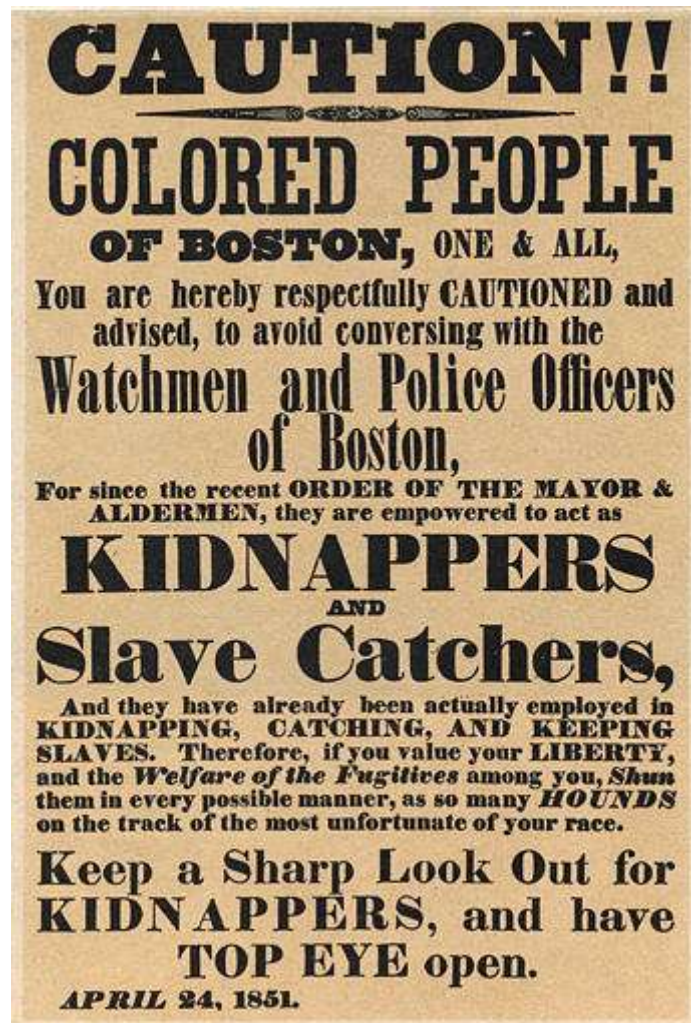
Such a decision was not made lightly. The free state of Iowa lay just across the Missouri River, but it was not safe. The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 went further than earlier laws, denying suspected slaves their right to a jury trial or even to testify on their own behalf. The law imposed \$1,000 fines and up to six month’s imprisonment on anyone who helped a fugitive slave.

And if Eliza and Celia were captured, what would Stephen do to them? He had every legal right to have them whipped, but that wasn’t the worst he could do. Stephen said that Eliza alone was worth \$1,200, more than most White families earned in a year. When enslaved people from border states were recaptured, they were often “sold South” to slave markets and ended up on Deep South plantations where escape was all but impossible.

Running away was a huge gamble, and it meant severing all personal ties with one’s past. Eliza and Celia made this decision while very young. Their ages are often reported as 16 and 14, but the Nuckolls account book shows that Eliza was 20 (and doesn’t mention Celia).

Under cover of darkness, they made it across the Missouri River into Iowa. Nuckolls pursued with a posse, but the young women—aided by the Underground Railroad—made their way to Chicago.

* * *



Abolitionist poster, Boston, MA, 1851. Wikimedia Commons

We don't know what became of Celia, but Eliza found work as a domestic servant in a Clark Street brothel. At some point she told her story to one of the women—and was betrayed. On November 12, 1860, Stephen and a “kidnapper for hire” came to take her back.

Eliza screamed as the men dragged her down Clark Street. Some local abolitionists intervened with help from law enforcement. Federal law was on Stephen's side; it specifically required law enforcement to help him. Instead, Stephen and Eliza were *both* arrested for disorderly conduct and held at an armory building on the site of today's Willis Tower (aka Sears Tower). When the

sheriff's deputies attempted to transfer Eliza to a nearby jail, an abolitionist mob seized her and took her away. Onlookers didn't think the deputies tried very hard to keep her, and some thought that at least one of the deputies was in on the plan to help Eliza escape to Canada. It was said she escaped on a Lake Michigan boat.

And that is the last that is known of Eliza Grayson. Stephen Nuckolls returned home empty-handed. Later that year the Nebraska Territorial Legislature overrode the governor's veto to abolish slavery in the territory. Meanwhile, Southern states had begun seceding from the United States explicitly to protect and expand slavery in defiance of the newly-elected president, Abraham Lincoln. The Civil War began the following spring. Stephen didn't fight, but was a Confederate sympathizer. He is the namesake of Nuckolls County, Nebraska, and of Nuckolls Square Park in Nebraska City.

No monuments exist to Eliza Grayson or to Celia, or to any of the other enslaved Nebraskans, but in 2016 Arlington High School teacher Barry Jurgensen led a 527-mile walk from Nebraska City to Chicago to honor the young women and to raise awareness about present-day human trafficking.

(9/1/2020)

For further reading:

[“When a Chicago Street Mob Rescued a Fugitive from Slavery,”](#) *Chicago Magazine*, June 24, 2019.

[“Local retraces former Nebraska City slaves’ first, last steps to freedom,”](#) *Nebraska City News-Press*, August 17, 2016.

[“HumaNature Episode 19: Freedom”](#) Wyoming Public Media, Mar. 29, 2017. (Podcast featuring interview with Barry Jurgensen.)

[“Nuckolls Family \[RG2325.AM\],”](#) finding aid for Nuckolls Family collection at History Nebraska.

Categories:

[African Americans; slavery; Nebraska City](#)

https://history.nebraska.gov/blog/caring-post-office-mural?utm_source=History+Nebraska+Emails+and+Updates&utm_campaign=c9ffd52c1c-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2020_08_28_07_14_COPY_01&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_d65f94cd5a-c9ffd52c1c-

Caring for a Post Office Mural

There has been a lot of buzz lately about the United States Postal Service and the essential public service it provides. Not only does it ensure our letters and important documents arrive on time, but it is a lifeline for small businesses and people who need medication delivered. It enables mail-in voting when people are away or cannot vote in-person, and it employs nearly 100,000 veterans! The USPS is also the only mail service that serves remote, rural areas.

The subject of today's post reflects that important role. The object is a terracotta maquette for a mural by Kansas artist Waylande Gregory, which once hung in the Columbus, Kansas, post office. Gregory was commissioned by the Works Progress Administration in 1939 to create the mural. The WPA was a New Deal program that invested heavily in public art in everyday locations as a way to boost the economy during the Great Depression.

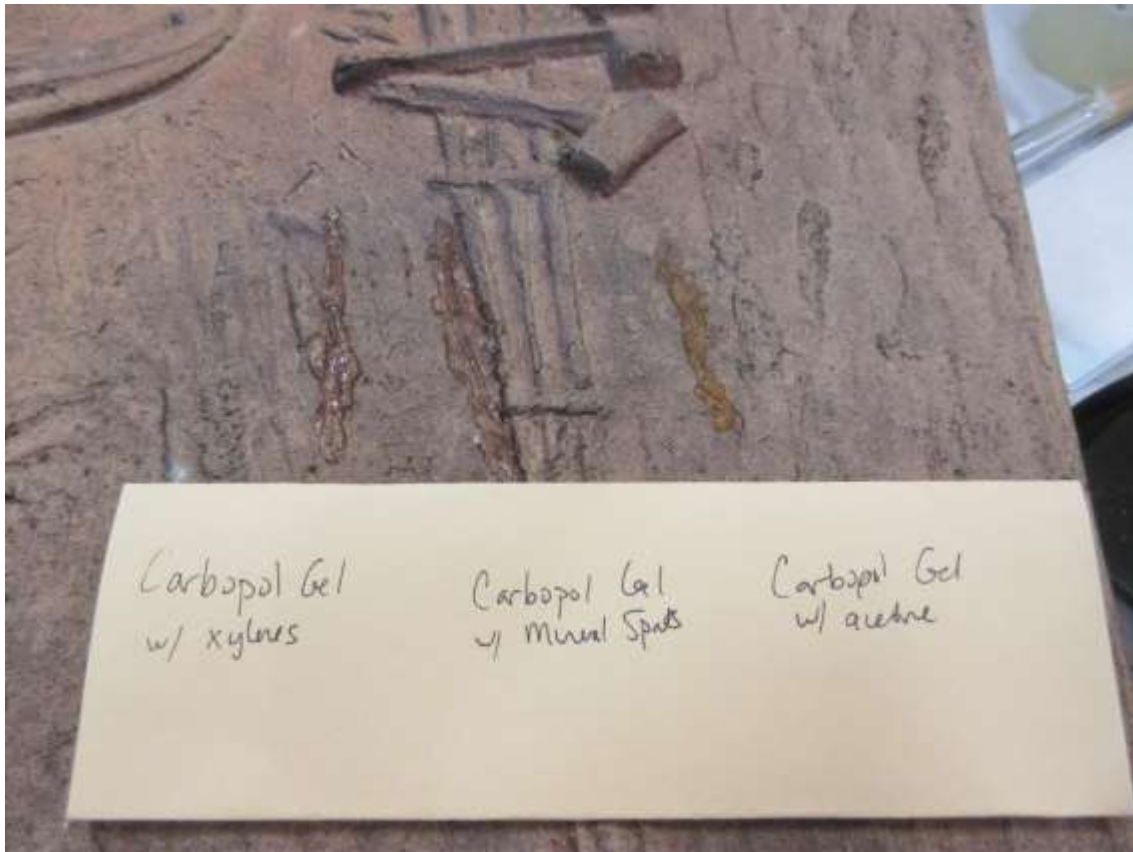
The maquette is a terracotta bas relief (meaning "low relief") that shows a postman on horseback delivering mail to a country mailbox with a group of horses in the field behind the fence.



Before treatment of the Waylande Gregory maquette.

The relief came to the Ford Center to be treated for an upcoming exhibit on Waylande Gregory at the Marianna Kistler Beach Museum of Art at Kansas State University in Manhattan, KS. They were in fair condition. There were small chipped losses along the edges and scratches on the surface. The larger losses to the corners of the far-right sections were going to be left as-is. The primary issue was the level of surface dirt and grime present, making some areas nearly black. There were also paint drips and thick residues present that disrupted the visual appeal of the mural.





On the left, you can see how dirty the mural sections were when we began to clean them. On the right is a gel test we performed to find the best method to lift the dirt and grime.

After before treatment photos were taken, the terracotta tiles were vacuumed using a variety of brushes to get into the cracks, crevices, and rough surface. The surface was cleaned with soot sponges. The paint and other drips were reduced mechanically with skewers and scalpels.

Further testing was carried out to determine the most appropriate solutions to clean the panels. Various poultice gels for cleaning were created and tested using a gelling agent and a range of solvents of varying polarity.



Objects Conservator Rebecca Cashman uses cotton poultices to clean the terracotta mural.

After much testing, the best cleaning solution was applied to cotton pads that were then tamped down with a stencil brush to ensure that contact was made with recessed areas. These were applied to the fronts and sides overall. These were then rinsed with cotton pads dampened with water.



After treatment, the mural tiles appear closer to their original appearance.

Where necessary, areas of loss were toned to match the surrounding areas. Particularly dark areas were also lightened with pigments.



The Waylande Gregory maquette on display at the Beach Museum. Waylande Gregory, R.F.D. (maquette for mural), 1939, terra cotta, Kansas State University,

Marianna Kistler Beach Museum of Art, 2016.86. Photos are courtesy of Kansas State University Photo Services.

We don't often get photos of pieces we've treated once they're back home. But the Beach Museum was kind enough to share photos with us of the maquette installed for the Gregory Exhibit. The exhibit **Waylande Gregory: Art Deco Ceramics and the Atomic Impulse** will be open September 29, 2020 – May 15, 2021, at the [Marianna Kistler Beach Museum of Art](#), at Kansas State University, 701 Beach Lane, Manhattan, KS. Visit the exhibit when it opens if you can travel there safely. And don't forget to support the United States Postal Service!

Categories:

[Gerald Ford Conservation Center](#), [conservation](#), [post office](#)